

Montana has 2 old towns on its hands

Historical society must handle care and feeding of artifacts and tourists.

Associated Press

VIRGINIA CITY, Mont. — When the Montana Legislature voted earlier this year to buy historic Virginia City, the Montana Historical Society became the owner of hundreds of historic buildings and thousands of artifacts from Montana's gold-rush era.

But with summer just weeks away, the society also was forced to hit the ground running to ensure that the historic town, and neighboring Nevada City, would be open for business come tourist season.

Faced with countless decisions on how artifacts should be handled and which historic buildings need work first, society director Brian Cockhill has found himself in the strange position of dealing with such matters as liquor licenses.

But he said it's important to the state, and especially to Virginia City residents, that this tourist season go as well as possible.

"We didn't get this solved until late and now we have to feed off the momentum" of the recent national publicity about the towns' future, Cockhill said. Merchants are reporting this is the best early season they've had in years, he said.

The two towns were purchased in April from Ford Bovey, whose parents acquired most of the historic gold-rush towns but who was losing money trying to preserve them. The Legislature agreed to spend \$9.5 million to buy and preserve the cities.

Virginia City, the gold-rush town that once was Montana's territorial capital, is a real town, the seat of Madison County. But most of its Main Street buildings were owned by Bovey and date from the 1860s; its draw is based on its gold-rush aura, including board sidewalks and period businesses.

Nevada City, a few miles down the road, is strictly a tourist attrac-

tion. It is composed of historic buildings and artifacts, but they were brought here from elsewhere for exhibition.

In an interview with the Montana Standard newspaper, Cockhill talked about the challenges facing the society in preserving the past.

While he talked, Cockhill could look out a window onto Virginia City's main street — a place filled with both huge challenge and promise for the society.

Once the initial confusion is over, Cockhill said, the society will be anxious to begin working to ensure the historic artifacts and

buildings are preserved and maintained.

"All you have to do is walk up and down the streets to see there hasn't been any routine maintenance done to the buildings," he said. "The buildings themselves are now an asset to the state, and we can't let them deteriorate any further."

The society will have to wait to begin work on the buildings until a commission appointed by Gov. Marc Racicot meets and decides how money allocated for the towns will be spent.

Then, teams from the historical

society, the U.S. Forest Service and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks will begin to decide which buildings need work first. Work should begin either late summer or this fall.

Historical society employees also need to begin inventorying hundreds of thousands of artifacts and documents stored inside the buildings, none of which have been stored using modern museum techniques, Cockhill said.

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"You can't do much if you don't know what you have," he said. "After a thorough inventory, we may find that we want to change exhibits. There could well be enough artifacts to support a lot of different exhibits."

"There's just an incredible wealth of material," Cockhill said. "For someone in my business, it's like discovering a vein of silver."

Although the historical society is used to dealing with the volume of artifacts found in the two towns, he said, "It's never had to do that all at once. It's a daunting challenge. Right now, we do have more artifacts stored in Helena. The society has been in existence for about 130 years."

It will take time for Virginia and Nevada cities to develop, but Cockhill is confident that it will "be a lot more bustling 10 years from now."

He expects the state to develop more interpretive displays, walking tours, hands-on history exhibits and living history demonstrations. Virginia City will face its own set of challenges in deciding growth issues, he said.

"There are people that are already betting it (growth in Virginia City) will happen," he said. "When you consider that Virginia and Nevada cities are already the third-, fourth- or fifth-largest tourist destination in the state, it's pretty significant that this place doesn't even have a gas station. That tells you what the future might hold."

Artist's paintings helped turn Yellowstone

By Pat Bellinghausen

For the Associated Press

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK — The first artist to sketch and paint the wild, roadless Yellowstone Country accompanied a government expedition protected by a the U.S. Cavalry 126 years ago.

Thomas Moran had never ridden a horse before his Yellowstone trek in the summer of 1871. The Eastern artist eschewed fatty foods, making him unaccustomed to the frying-pan suppers that were a staple of camp life on the Hayden Expedition.

Though neither a rugged out-

fore setting foot in Yellowstone itself.

Moran reached what would become Yellowstone National Park on July 24, 1871, "camping at the Hot Springs, Gardner's River."

Two days later, Moran and Jackson moved on to Tower Falls.

On July 27, the artist first gazed upon the landscape that would assure him a place in history, the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. For the next four days, Moran and Jackson remained near the canyon, sketching and photographing around the falls.

From there, the artist and pho-

tographer headed south after the main expedition party, making camp at Mud Volcano on July 31. By noon the next day, they re-joined the rest of the expedition near Yellowstone Lake. On Aug. 4, Moran wrote in his neat, pencil script:

"Remained all this day at camp. Did some sketching about the spring. Took the boat to the springs farther round the lake and had a hard pull to get back as the lake was rough and the wind against us."

On Aug. 6, Moran and Jackson got lost in the forest for at least the

second time on the trip. Moran wrote:

"Jackson, Dixon and myself started out to find Madison. I got a photograph of it, but after traveling through heavy forest til 2 o'clock, gave up the search and got back to camp at evening."

Moran spent the next day at camp. Lt. Doane, an officer who had accompanied the Langford Expedition of 1870 arrived at Fort Ellis with orders to recruit a military escort. It was Doane whose sketches Moran had been hired to improve for the Yellowstone articles in Scribner's

Yellowstone into national park

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zine.

Moran was invited to return with the soldiers. He didn't think long about his answer: "As the wonders of the Yellowstone had been seen, I conclude to return" Moran wrote, although he had yet to see a geyser.

The last lines of his diary entry gives an inkling about why he was ready to head home: "4 biscuits a day for the last 5 days." That's all he had been eating.

On their way back to the fort, Doane took the artist and photographer on a tour of the "geysers on the Firehole River." The next day, Moran wrote, he helped Jackson

photograph the geysers.

Before 1871 ended, legislation had been introduced in Congress to set aside the Yellowstone Country as a national park forever. Shortly thereafter, according to Yellowstone historian Aubrey Haines, Hayden was able to set up an exhibit in the Capitol Rotunda that included Jackson photographs and Moran sketches.

Copies of the Langford article Moran had illustrated also were made available to members of Congress.

Congress passed the park bill, which President Ulysses S. Grant signed on March 1, 1872.

